

# **An Open Letter from the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal (ACCCR) to Pope Francis and the Synod Secretariat**

Dear Pope Francis and Archbishop Baldisseri,

Firstly we want to thank Pope Francis sincerely for trusting us and giving us as members of the people of God a chance to participate in preparations for the Synod. We appreciate that the pope takes the *sensus fidelium*, the faith discernment of the people seriously, and that he has asked difficult questions, questions that many in the hierarchy still find difficult to confront. You speak from the heart, Pope Francis; we shall try to do the same.

Before responding to your invitation we need to say that there is a fundamental, unavoidable context that is basic to any response from Australian Catholics to the Synod's questions. That context is the child sexual abuse crisis. The Synod cannot lose sight of the fact that it is the hierarchy that has broken trust and failed so many Catholic families in such an appalling way. Because of the complete failure of our bishops to respond to this crisis truthfully and effectively, Catholics and the public generally find it extraordinarily difficult to take seriously anything that the hierarchical church says about relationships, family, gender, and sexuality.

In Australia the evidence is overwhelming that bishops failed to act to protect the most innocent and vulnerable from predator priests, and the local episcopate is only now beginning to face up to its responsibility under severe pressure from secular authorities. The Catholic Church in Australia is reeling from the findings of a Victorian State Government investigation into the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests. That report noted that neither Cardinal Pell of Sydney nor Archbishop Hart of Melbourne, when called to defend the failure of the Church's leadership gave any indication that they recognised that there is something much deeper at issue: the need for structural and cultural change in the governance of the Catholic Church.

Thus it seems to many Catholics that the Synod questionnaire could be interpreted as a distraction taking up everyone's time examining the laity's compliance with the hierarchy's authoritarian rules as though this is the problem. Instead we, as the people of God, should be examining the Church's governance structures, particularly around optional celibacy and women and men in ministry, because these are the only changes that will correct the destructive culture that clericalism and its exclusion of women have produced. It is unsustainable to avoid the injustice of not treating men and women equally, even regarding priestly ordination. As long as this continues the 'justice' of the Church's other teachings will not be accepted. We all look forward to the time when the hierarchy recognizes the signs of the times and puts its energy into ensuring that the faithful have proper access to Christ's teachings of love, equality and justice.

The Synod must understand that any consideration of family and relational ethics that fails to take this context into account will not comprehend the level of cynicism about the hierarchical church among Catholics and the broader community.

Also many Catholics are aware that the Australian bishops have no experience of actual family life. As celibates with secure board, lodging and a modest but guaranteed income, they

simply don't experience the trials, tribulations, demands and costs involved in raising and educating children, living in an intimate marital relationship and of earning a living in an uncertain job market. In this context many find it difficult to believe anything that the hierarchy says about family, gender, marriage or sexuality.

We have to say that this impression is re-enforced by the Synod's Preparatory Document (PD). It is written in clumsy Vatican rhetoric that sounds awkward and pretentious when translated into English. There is another underlying problem with the PD: nowhere does the document define what it means by 'family'. There is no recognition that the way in which humans have related intimately to each other and formed basic communities throughout history has varied enormously. People have lived in clans, tribes, extended or patriarchal families, polygamous groupings, monastic and religious communities, and one on one marriage – and all have claimed to be 'families'.

Historically none of these groupings are normative. The way traditional pre-European settlement Australian Aborigines lived and reared children was completely different to the way modern Australians live, just as Cro-Magnon groupings in Europe were totally different to the way in which modern Europeans relate and bring-up children. Thus to generalise about 'family' is to drain the word of any real meaning. The PD seems to assume (although it doesn't clarify this anywhere) that throughout history there has been a 'thing' called 'family' and that the church knows what this is. It seems to assume that something like the modern nuclear family is normative even though this model is no older than the mid-nineteenth century.

We will turn now to the question headings of the PD and comment on several of them individually.

### **The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium**

We would simply respond that the New Testament, understood in a generalized sense, is a genuine source to guide modern family life. Clearly the New Testament teaching on love, forgiveness, sacrifice of self, care for others, justice and reconciliation are eminently relevant to society and family life. Christians know these teachings and take them seriously. However, the large majority of especially younger Catholics in Australia would never have heard of Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, let alone *Familiaris consortio*, or other documents of the papal magisterium. If, perchance, they had heard of them they would find them largely irrelevant. Families can best be supported by a practice of faith that focuses on Jesus teachings of love and justice, kindness and respect, consistent with the best values of Australian society.

Here, parenthetically, it is worth noting that speaking of the bible, a conciliar document and papal or magisterial pronouncements together as though they were theologically equivalent is very questionable. The bible is an unquestioned source of revelation for the church, the document of an ecumenical council must be taken as part of church teaching, whereas a so-called apostolic constitution is of minor authority. It is precisely these kinds of outdated and authoritarian statements on issues associated with human sexuality and marriage that have alienated Catholics who yearn for an inclusive practice of faith.

## **Marriage According to the Natural Law**

‘Natural law’ is a very problematic term, so why use it? Most Catholics are guided by their conscience and this has been a major tenet of Catholic faith and practice for centuries. The term ‘natural law’ is meaningless to most people today. People don’t understand it because it is too broad and it is applied in the PD as if the world were static and natural law was normative always and everywhere. That doesn’t mean that our contemporaries don’t think that nature is wonderful and they know it operates according to its own laws; without that science would be impossible. But people also know that nature is the product of evolution; that is, it is constantly changing. It is creative and inventive. We live in an evolving universe, not a static universe.

The source of natural law theory within Catholicism is Saint Thomas Aquinas. He is actually rather cautious in his approach to natural law. He treats it in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologica* (at questions 90-94). He says that it is an aspect of divine providence and is the way in which an individual participates in the eternal law. For him the natural law is the application of the eternal law to the principles of practical behaviour. It is knowable by all and is binding on all. That made eminent sense in the medieval world. Aquinas, however, is cautious when applying those general principles to specific times, people, circumstances and places. He says ‘Consequently we must say that the natural law, as to general principles, is the same for all’ (1a IIae, 94, a4). It was only in the nineteenth century that the Neo-Scholastic theologians began applying the natural law to the most specific of circumstances including gender and sexuality.

Today we live in a more fluid universe and are far more circumspect in applying such generalised concepts as natural law to the specific circumstances of how we arrange our lives and intimate relationships. Most Catholics today simply don’t accept that the natural law somehow pre-determines that the only ‘natural’ union possible for humankind is that between a man and a woman. They are more concerned about love: do people love each other? It doesn’t matter if they are of the same gender. The natural law doesn’t enter into their considerations. So we feel that this kind of application of the natural law to the most specific of circumstances is not justified. Instead of looking to generalised principles, the church needs to refer to the experience of the faithful.

## **The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization**

The greatest thing the Church can do for families and Catholic evangelisation is to drop its authoritarian stances on mixed marriage, divorced and remarried Catholics, same sex relations and contraception, and make a genuine effort to make Jesus’ message of love and justice relevant to today’s world. Then the world will know we are Christians by our love and God will be our judge.

We also need to recognize that the collapse in Mass attendance especially among young families and their school-age children is widespread. Many Catholics now describe themselves as ‘Cultural Catholics’, still proud to belong to a theological tradition which has guided their consciences and enriched their lives; they send their children to Catholic schools at considerable expense to themselves, but still feel compromised by and disassociated from a practice of faith that they yearn for and see as life giving. They are further alienated by the current governance of the local Church which they see as very un-Australian and undemocratic. Historically the Church, in spreading the Good News of the Kingdom, has

always engaged with the communities around her in ways which included the best values of those peoples. Unless the Church does this, as Saint Paul clearly realised, it cannot communicate effectively with people, be they Catholic or secular.

Pope Benedict XVI at Regensburg acknowledged that ‘The best of Greek values are an integral part of the Christian faith.’ Here in Australia the failure of the Church to realise that ‘The Best of Australian values are an Integral part of the Catholic Faith’ has been a major factor in alienating young families from the Church.

Certainly some parts of the church’s teaching on the family are well known, even notorious. The papal teaching on contraception, for instance, is extremely well known and not accepted by Catholics of fertile age. In Australia Catholic fertility is 0.5% below national fertility which clearly indicates that Catholics have simply not ‘received’ the papal teaching. The great English theologian Cardinal John Henry Newman argued that the belief of the laity must be taken into account in the development of doctrine. Evidence from across the world indicates that the rejection of the papal teaching on contraception is widespread. Birth rates in Catholic countries like Italy (1.41), Poland (1.32), Croatia (1.45) and Lithuania (1.28) indicate that Catholics in these countries also ignore *Humanae vitae*. So when the PD asks: ‘Is this moral teaching accepted’ the obvious answer is ‘No’. The theological consequence of that is that a teaching that is not accepted by the *sensus fidelium* cannot be construed as church teaching.

The role of the magisterium is to articulate the ‘belief of the Church’. To ascertain that popes need to be listening to bishops, bishops need to be listening to priests, theologians and laypeople. That hasn’t happened for many centuries now. All too often issues such as contraception, the primacy of conscience, the moral principle of the lesser of two evils, the ordination of women cannot be discussed in Church controlled media outlets and forums. As a consequence Catholics consider that some of the directives emanating from Rome are so out of touch with the beliefs of the Church that the ‘Magisterium’ as a source of sound doctrine has little credibility.

In light of the falling birth rates noted above the PD goes on to make the extraordinary and irresponsible statement: ‘How can an increase in births be promoted?’ It is not the church’s responsibility to reverse falling populations. The assumption seems to be that high birth rates are desirable, but no theological reason is forthcoming to support this. Has the PD never heard of world over-population? Such statements are morally irresponsible in light of the fact that the majority of the human race is condemned to poverty and vast swathes of the world environment are destroyed as a result of too many people. One of our respondents commented: ‘I simply don’t understand how any intelligent person in this day and age would be promoting an increase in the birth rate as a method of evangelisation. That the Vatican does so indicates how it has irresponsibly neglected to recognise the sign of the times and engage in spreading Jesus’ teachings in our world.’

Most Australian Catholics are convinced that the hierarchy’s place in Christian marriage is to encourage and offer support through Jesus’ message of love, equality, forgiveness, and respect for all family members, however the family is constructed, traditionally or otherwise. It is not the hierarchy’s place to enter into the intimacy of a couple’s married life with rules about contraception and sexual practices. Presumably bishops have no experience of such matters. They need only to emphasise Jesus message of kindness and respect for God’s gift of human sexuality.

## Other Challenges and Proposals

We have to recognize that just as orthodoxy (theology and church teaching) have developed over the course of church history, so has orthopraxis, the way we live the Christian life. We must recover the teaching that the Holy Spirit speaks in the experience of the faithful as well as through church teaching. In many of the practical moral issues centring on the family it is laypeople who are leading the way and perhaps the hierarchy need to listen humbly to the people of God. So rather than static, definitive ‘church teaching on the family’ as the PD says, we need to be open to the world around us and following Jesus carefully ‘interpret the signs of the times’ (Matt 16:4), a theme often taken up by Pope John XXIII. The world has much to teach us. As Pope Francis himself has emphasized God’s salvation is always present to us and Aquinas says that God’s grace completely pervades the entire created cosmos and the world is, in a literal sense, a sacrament of the presence of God, a ‘mysterious infinity’ where the Transcendent can be discovered.

In conclusion we believe that if the Church is going to be able to offer sound guidance on family values, there has to be the kind of regular consultation at the diocesan level which Pope Francis has initiated at the international level. His example is the first step for a pastoral renewal of Catholicism which will enable it to communicate with the people of Australia, be they believers or not. If the Church is to recover its evangelizing energy and once again reflect the gentleness, mercy and forgiveness that, as Saint Paul says ‘shines in the face of Christ’ (II Cor 4:6), it is going to need root and branch reform. The crisis that we face as Australian Catholics and members of the universal Church is a crisis of leadership which will only be solved when the hierarchy learn to consult the faithful on everything to do with faith.

This is what papal teaching calls ‘subsidiarity’. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, says bluntly: ‘Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization” (Evangelii Gaudium, 16). The hierarchy need a similar humility. They, like the pope, need to consult the people. Again, thank you Pope Francis for the chance to speak to you and to the bishops.

Yours respectfully,

Marilyn Hatton and Paul Collins for An Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal including the following Church renewal groups:

Women and the Australian Church (WATAC)  
Catholics for Ministry  
Catholics for Renewal  
Aggiornamento  
Friendship Group  
Inclusive Catholics

And the following Australian Catholics:

Moira and Tom Hayes  
Margaret and Peter Zillman

Vivien Arnold and Lindsay Roe  
Catherine and Peter Bearsley  
Sister Helen Carboon, PVBM  
Anne Connolly  
Sister Betty McMahon, RSCJ  
Ann Nugent  
Terry Curtin  
John Collins  
Peter Wilkinson  
Kevin Walcot  
Fran Black  
Monica and Andrew Phelan  
Moirra Coombs  
Jacquie Preiss  
Brian McKittrick  
Joceyln MacLean  
Dr Anne O'Brien  
Patrick Durack  
Moirra and Denis Fitzsimon  
David Rushton  
Annemarie Davies  
Marie Hall  
Dr Jane Anderson  
Marian Oxenburgh  
Helen Oxenburgh-Lowe  
Father Paschal Kearney, CSSP  
Deacon Brian Sykes  
Liam Hannon  
Adrian Downes  
Michael Buswell  
Kathleen Short  
Lucia and Peter Keightley  
Louis Hebrard  
John Collins  
Terry Curtin  
Vivien Williams  
Peter Beeson  
Margaret and Frank Purcell  
Sister Cecilia Merrigan, CSB  
Charles and Angela Griss  
Father Greg Reynolds  
Peter Johnstone  
Dr Marie Fels  
Robert M. Fels  
Marie T. McCarthy  
Margaret McGrath RSM  
Les and Annette Milross  
Kaye Hodge  
Margaret Day  
Bernice Moore

Helen Coles  
Faye Lawrence  
Maureen Watterson  
Margaret Knowlden  
Judi Powe  
Annette Potter  
Helen Jagoe  
Lyn Ryan  
Laraine Jeffs  
Sr. Sheila Quonoey PBVM  
Anna CM Flynn-Dolle and Robert J Flynn  
Pauline O'Brien and Robert O'Brien  
Betty Carmody  
Helen Farrell  
Anne O'Brien  
Fran Topp  
Nance Cale  
Frances Warner  
Gary and Grainne Norton  
Diana Tolliver  
Deirdre Grusovin  
John & Therese Mills. Janet Cain  
Elizabeth Willows  
Janet Galos  
Donna Bowker  
Gerard and Jane Nolan  
Jackie Wall